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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a survey that investigated which countries follow the United Nations recommendations by having a national policy for library services to visually impaired and other print handicapped children. Questionnaires were distributed to the 78 members of the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) Section of Libraries for the Blind, and responses were received from 22 members, representing 17 countries. Results showed that Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, South Africa, Sweden, and the United States have adopted such a national policy. The following criteria were used to characterize a national policy: legislation; goal of production/criteria for selection; information such as union catalogs or national bibliographies; lending by a library network; cooperation with schools for the visually handicapped; trained staff; and publicly funded services. Responding countries that lack a specific national policy for library services to visually impaired children were Belgium, Botswana, Canada, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. (MES)

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National Policies for Library Services to Visually Impaired and other Print Handicapped Children

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Abstract

In this paper the author s gives an account of the result of a survey trying to investigate which countries follow the United Nations recommendations by having a national policy for library services to visually impaired and other print handicapped children. The paper ends with conclusions and recommendations of what a national policy could contain

Paper

Introduction

Visually impaired children cannot read print or what is in the world of the blind called "ink-print". Their means for reading are mainly embossed writing and sound recordings, sometimes also large print. The by UNESCO recommended embossed writing for the blind is called braille, named after it's inventor Louis Braille (1809-1852). Beside braille there is the Moon writing still used by a minority in the UK and other Anglophone countries. Braille can be red on paper and on braille bars connected to a computer. Sound recordings can be stored on different media. Analogue recordings are today usually stored on compact cassettes, either 2 and 4 track. Digital recordings are under development. There is also large print for those who have enough sight to read larger letter and enlargement devices like CCTV.

There are several international documents and agreements that recommends states to treat all children equally. Such documents are the United Nations' Convention of the Rights of the

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Child , Salamanca Declaration and the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with disabilities (December 1993) . However these documents have no legal status as long as the state hasn't signed them and legislated in accordance with the content.

Many democracies have included the basic Human Rights, such as freedom of information, in their constitutions. Handicapped children thus have the same right to information as other children. They also have equal rights to education and to information. But sometimes this is not the case, even though the constitution states so. Free education for handicapped children is something that exists in the rich world but in developing countries such is scarce. Reading material for handicapped people like the visually impaired is also inadequate not only in developing countries but practically all over the world. There are of course a few exceptions.

Most libraries for the Visually Impaired have originally been created in order to provide visually impaired people with both leisure reading and text books. I would say that this is still the case as there is no book market for blind people. The creation of a lending library is therefore a good solution for the provision of literature. If you don't get anything to read , you will probably loose your reading skill, at least not improve it. In order to be good readers children need plenty of leisure reading. The role of the library for the visually impaired must be both that of a publisher, book store and library and some times also of a news stand.

In a few countries there are also national policies guaranteeing the rights to such library service. As it is of utmost importance that visually impaired children get reading material sufficiently I set out to investigate this matter at the end of December 1998. I did so by sending out a questionnaire to the members of the IFLA Section of Libraries for the Blind. There are 78 members and therefore 78 questionnaires. I received 22 answers representing 17 countries. Seven of the answering countries have a national policy for library services to visually children. They not only provided me with a filled in questionnaire but also with printed documents and literature in this are.

National policies

By national policy I mean a policy adopted by government and sanctioned by law.

According to the responses of the questionnaire the following countries have adopted a national policy for providing visually impaired and other disabled children with library material:

- Denmark
- Netherlands
- Norway
- Russia
- South Africa
- Sweden
- USA

Botswana is about to build up a national library service for the blind. Finland has a national policy for library services to visually impaired but have not any special directives concerning children. The same thing may be said for Canada.

Some countries, like Canada and Denmark, also have Repository law that includes special format material.

The collection of Alternate format of the National Library of Canada is that of legal deposit copies. Whereas CNIB Library in practise has the role of a national library for visually impaired children, when it comes to nation wide services. Furthermore the National Library of Canada has published guidelines for library services to print disabled people.

Criteria

What is then the difference between countries with a national policy and those who only have privately run libraries?

First of all I want to point out that the policies differ a lot between the different nations but that there are certain criteria that characterise a national policy. Not all the nations have exactly the same rules and don't fulfil all the criteria mentioned.

The criteria are:

- Legislation (like a Library law)
- Goal of production/criteria for selection
- Information such as Union Catalogues or National Bibliographies
- Lending by a library network
- Cooperation with schools for the visually handicapped
- Trained staff
- The services are publicly funded

Legislation

In the Scandinavian countries you have library laws guaranteeing the library service to visually impaired of all ages. The Swedish legislation as well as the Danish also includes other print handicapped groups.

In the Southafrican Library Act of 1998 one of the functions referred to is the provision of a library service for all blind and print handicapped persons. In Russia the Presidential program "Children of Russia" from 1998 states that all children should have equal education and equal access to information.

The American Public Law (Sec.1, 80 Stat. 330) of July 30, 1966, is an amendment of the Acts of March 3, 1931, and October 9, 1962, relating to the furnishing of books and other materials to the blind so as to authorise the furnishing of such books and other materials to other handicapped persons, includes children within its provision as well as adults.

Beside the library law copyright regulations are very important. Copyright legislation in the Scandinavian countries, Canada, USA and Southafrica gives the libraries right to produce talking books and braille without the permission of the copyright holder.

Goals of production

Ideally all books for children should be available also for disabled children. However, this is not even the case in countries with a national policy. According to the Swedish Parliamentary Act of 1977 the national production goal of talking books is set up is 25 per cent of the annual book production. The Swedish Library of Talking Books (TPB) which is the central library, has however decided that all children's literature except school books shall be produced as talking books and as about half of the annual braille book production shall be children's books.

I have not found any similar kind of goal set up in any of the other countries with a national policy.

Information

Information about reading material in alternate formats is often scares. It is therefore one of the main tasks for the libraries for the visually impaired to regularly inform their clients of

their stocks. Catalogues are the most important issue. In Scandinavia copyright also states that all talking books must be registered i.e. catalogued. In countries where you have a national policy you either have union catalogues or are included in the national bibliographies. The catalogues of the National Library Service of for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) of the Library of Congress is included in the Library of Congress Catalogue and thus also available on Internet. The Danish and the Norwegian catalogues are part of the National Bibliography. Also the Swedish collection of special format material is available on Internet, though this catalogue is not a part of the National Bibliography but part of the Public Library Union catalogue.

In Canada the also the CNIB collection is a part of CANUC the Canadian National Bibliography.

Practically all libraries in this survey also publish printed catalogues for their clients and on other media such as braille and tape.

NLS provides its network agencies also with bibliographical tools and publicity tools such as printed catalogues.

Other means of information is training of parents, teachers and librarians..

Printed material as brochures is also common.

Co-operation with schools and other institutions

That co-operation with nursery schools, schools and parents is necessary all the answering libraries are of one opinion.

School libraries, where they exist, are of course important mediators. However, as far as I can see from my sources it is only in the US you have legislation stating the role of the School Library (the Mainstreaming Act) in the provision of special format material. By law the Librarian of Congress through NLS, designate lending of reading material and talking books to for example schools for the blind and physically handicapped.

In Denmark Refsnaesskolen, the School and Resource Centre for Blind Children is responsible for the library services to visually impaired children and young adults ages 7-16, whereas the public libraries are answerable for leisure reading to children with other disabilities.

The Southafrican Library for the Blind have collections of books (block loans) in many of the 17 schools for the blind in the country. Three of these schools also have audio collections.

Library networks: Decentralised services

In most countries library service to the visually impaired is centralised, often to a big city. Distribution is in many cases done by post as " free matter for the blind" due to an international agreement. National policies of library services to handicapped children are often a part of a countries handicap policy. Since the 1970s often a part of an integration policy.

In Sweden the talking books lending has been a fully integrated part of the public library services for 15 years. But the integration actually started already in 1955 when public libraries at the same time as the then privately run Library for the Blind started to make talking books. The Central Library (TPB) does not lend talking books to individuals. However, it has not been that easy to integrate the talking book lending in the children's department. Many children's librarians consider the lending of talking books as a task for the social services or the out-reach services. A constant flow of information and a training program is about to change this attitude. The Dyslexia Campaign in Sweden 1997/1998 focused on a new print disabled group- those with learning disabilities. The campaign led to that talking book stock of

children's books now are an integrated part in the children's department.

The United States has a national network providing library services to blind and physically handicapped people. The structure of this national network has several components. They are the Library of Congress' National Library Service for the Blind and Physically handicapped (NLS), four multistate centers, 56 regional libraries an 101 subregional libraries (all in public libraries and informally other public libraries which co-operate by referring potential patrons, housing demonstration collections and in other ways. Books and magazines in braille, cassette and disc formats as well as audio play-back equipment and accessories are provided free to individuals and institutions eligible for services. The one agency within the structure that interlocks with all other agencies in the network is NLS.

As already mentioned the Danish National Library for the Blind is not responsible for the lending to visually impaired children but this is the task of Refsnaesskolen. The library has a minor collection of children's books. All disabled children can borrow talking books from the Danish public libraries.

Canada has a special library, the CNIB Library for the Blind, which is part of the private organisation Canadian Institute for the Blind. The Public Libraries of Canada also maintain services according to the constitution. The National libraries has on-site lending to disabled children.

Trained staff

The central libraries in Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Southafrica, Sweden and USA all have trained children librarian. Only the one at Refsnaesskolen in Denmark is fully occupied in the children's services. Quite naturally as this school does not serve adults.

Also the National Library in the UK has a full time trained children's librarian among its staff.

Public funding

Common for the countries with a national policy for library services to visually impaired children and young adults is that they are all publicly funded. In the Scandinavian countries the state takes on responsibility for the production of talking books and braille and electronic books but not for large print. The Central libraries are totally government funded. The municipalities are the principals of the public libraries that also serve handicapped children. As mentioned before, in Sweden all talking books lending is run by the public libraries whereas the braille lending and the Student's Library are the responsibility of TPB.

NLS (Library of Congress) is federally financed. However NLS does not provide direct financial support to other agencies in the network. It does provide a huge amount of money in material, equipment, services and other kind of contributions. These tools are probably the basic tools of the services.

In the Netherlands the five libraries for the blind recently were united under one" federative hat". The Dutch libraries receive 90 per cent of their funding from the Government which also set up guidelines for their operation.

The Government covers the regular salaries of the Southafrican library; the rest is financed on voluntary bases.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As I told you in the beginning I received altogether 22 responses on my questionnaire. From some countries I received answers from several libraries. According to the answers the

following countries do not have a national policy for library services to visually impaired persons:

- Belgium
- (Botswana)
- (Canada)
- (Finland)
- Iceland
- Ireland
- Israel
- Japan
- Switzerland
- United Kingdom

I have put three countries in brackets because they have answered that they lack a specific national policy for library services to children and young adults but have a national policy for the services of visually impaired as a whole.

The lack of answers from Germany and France may illustrate the problems in those countries, who lack a central policy for library services to the disabled. From the United Kingdom I only received answer from one library, the National Library for the Blind which, has braille services but also a website for young readers but does not lend talking books.

All answering libraries have a service to the children and young adults. Although the annual production and the variety of media vary a lot. Some libraries only serve braille readers others have both talking books, Braille, electronic media and tactile picture books in their stocks.

In my questionnaire I also asked for certain statistics as size of stock and annual lending. As the frequency of answers was comparatively low it is hard to draw any conclusion from the information received. However, there is an almost drastic difference, as far as lending is concerned, between the libraries in countries with a national policy and those lacking one. Though in countries like Sweden in the US where you have a decentralised lending you either lack figures or just have statistics for the interlending from the central library.

Although I haven't asked any questions about the funding the conclusion must be that were there is public funding the annual acquisition is much larger than in libraries run on private bases Integration in a larger network seems to be a part of a national policy aiming to normalisation. The larger the network , the better lending figures.

The existence of good catalogues means that the client, be it either another library or an individual, can get information about the collections or about single titles. It is likewise important that cataloguing material is published in several different formats. Topic lists is another way of informing clients. Catalogues are also the most important tools for interlending. An inclusion of bibliographic data in the national bibliography or a large union catalogue is therefore to be recommended.

I asked the libraries if they used trained children's librarians for these kind of services and about half of them answered yes. Both TPB in Sweden and NLS, in the US, and its network organisation have training and information programs for librarians and other mediator. From my own experience in this field I know how important it is to train mediators in how to use the library services for alternate material. So one conclusion must be that training is very important for the integration in for example the public library system.

In order to promote literacy among the blind it is important for a nation to keep good braille good collections and transcription services. A sighted child can see signs around him all the time, like commercials, street names etc. This is called sign reading and is the first stage of reading. Many visually impaired children do not get acquainted with braille until they enter

school. It is therefore a necessary task for the library to establish contact with the parents of blind children. Pre-schoolteachers recommend that blind children as early as possible get acquainted with braille. Most libraries for the visually impaired have picture books with interfoliated transparent plastic sheet for the braille text. Many libraries also of tactile picture books that can be used both for sighted and blind children.

Today, in most industrialized countries disabled children are integrated in the main stream school. Traditionally schools for the blind also have library services. This is still the case in many countries. We also know from history that many of school libraries for the blind have been integrated in larger libraries. This is the case in Sweden were the special schools for the blind have seized to exist in the 1980s and the library services have been transferred to the TPB (the State Library).

In order to create a professionalism in the area of library service to visually impaired children and young adults the staffing is very important. Trained children's librarians does not exist in all libraries for the blind. According to the answers on my questionnaire the children's librarians of the libraries for the visually impaired also have other task than children's services. Their main duty seems to the selection of books. But they also take part in the dissemination of information, reading promotion and training of colleagues in the public libraries and school libraries. Promotion work is of course very important.

In my questionnaire I did not touch upon the role of the Library School when training student's for future tasks as services to disabled children and young adults. However, I must emphasise that training of librarians should be a part of a national policy for visually impaired children. Library Schools ought to take notice of these services in their training programmes. Today fewer and fewer library schools include courses in library services to the disabled in their curriculum's. The tendency is to concentrate on IT - librarians become information brokers. But let me point out that libraries for the blind also are part of this digitisation. Th Electronic Library for the blind and other printhandicapped already exists. Actually the Information Technology is the solution of many problems that exists for the blind who wants to get access to information. For example the CNIB Library has a service called Visunet were they use Internet both for information and distribution to their patrons. Many other libraries have started or are on the point of starting similar services. Projects with broadband distribution of digitised talking books are just about to start in Sweden.

But the most important issue is of course that governments takes the responsibility for all their citizens. As I said before the Information technology opens the world of information for the visually handicapped. But you have to have the right the right devises and these devices are often too expensive for the individual. I would therefore recommend that governments include free aid of assistive computer devices in their handicap policies.

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